

GILA NATIONAL FOREST



NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: Sept. 19, 2014

Gila National Forest Travel Management Project Decision Upheld

SILVER CITY, N.M. -- Gilbert Zepeda, Southwestern Deputy Regional Forester, has notified appellants of the disposition of 22 appeals on the Gila National Forest Travel Management Project. Twenty-two appeals were initially received; of these four were dismissed without review because they failed to meet the agency's criteria for an appeal. Another appeal was withdrawn by the appellant. The remaining appeals were reviewed by a regional agency appeal review team, which made recommendations to Zepeda. As Appeal Deciding Officer, Zepeda upheld the project decision allowing for implementation this coming spring.

Forest managers understand that travel management is a change from how the national forest has been accessed in the past. Of the 4,613 miles of road currently open to motorized travel, 3,334 miles will remain open on the forest. There is also an increase in ATV trail opportunities from 16 to 179 miles. Approximately 96 percent of non-wilderness lands will be within two miles of an open road and about 99 percent within three miles of an open road. Motor vehicles will continue to be a legitimate and appropriate way for people to enjoy the forest and access will still be provided while protecting natural resources for future generations.

Appellants included Catron, Grant, and Hidalgo county commissioners, groups representing motorized recreational interests as well as environmental interests and various individuals. Zepeda's determination on the appeals upholds the Gila National Forest Travel Management Project Decision signed by Forest Supervisor Kelly Russell. In upholding the decision, Zepeda found that laws, regulations and policies were followed appropriately.

The Gila National Forest Travel Management Project has undergone extensive environmental analysis and public involvement since 2005. Public comment received throughout the process was considered in the project decision, which designated specific Forest Service roads and

trails as open to public motorized use, and eliminated cross-country motorized travel. Zepeda's determination represents the final step in the planning process, and no additional appeal opportunities exist.

The Gila National Forest, in cooperation with other agencies and partner groups, plans to begin implementation of the project this coming spring. This will include publication of a free Motor Vehicle Use Map. Actions this upcoming year will focus on signing of the designated system and public education regarding the new rules for motorized use in the Gila National Forest. Minimal route rehabilitation and decommissioning activities are expected this coming year.

The forest expects to implement the decision in such a way as to give users time to understand the new regulations. Any errors found on the Motor Vehicle Use Map, or places that were not included for camping and access, can be brought to the attention of your local district ranger for future consideration. This decision allows for future changes through the NEPA process as needed to ensure adequate access for the public.

The Gila National Forest Travel Management Project Record of Final Environmental Impact Statement is posted at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/gila/home/?cid=STELPRDB5035773>.

We appreciate your continued feedback on management of the Gila National Forest.

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